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Firing Guilty Officials Is the Way to Plug Leaks

It has long been clear that the Reagan administration's concern about leaks borders on paranoia. Now it appears that the president's men are as serious as they say they are. After five years of proposing dangerously repressive legislative remedies and implementing ever tighter administrative restrictions on the flow of information, they have finally taken the kind of public action that might actually do some good. They have fired two purported leakers.

The names of the two, one at the Pentagon, the other at the State Department,

Viewpoint

by Hodding Carter III

are not particularly important. What is important are two characteristics they shared. Both were political appointees. Both obviously felt their leaks advanced the president's "real" agenda.

Therein lies the lesson. The leaks that matter in Washington (as opposed to espionage, which is another matter) are almost invariably the work of political players rather than bureaucratic moles. That is not the way that presidents and their teams usually see it. The initial reaction, from a Jimmy Carter no less than a Ronald Reagan, to the flood of leaks now commonplace in every administration is that faceless men and women at lower levels are deliberately sabotaging their political mandate with unauthorized disclosures.

And so there is much presidential pounding on desks and throwing of the furniture, not always figuratively, and demands that something be done. If it is this administration, that something includes radically increased polygraph testing, administrative orders restricting officials' access to information and the access of reporters to officials, and the creeping evolu-

tion of an Official Secrets Act regime similar to Britain's. The great hunt is launched, the rabbits are sent to hole and the quail flushed, and nothing happens, except the further diminution of freedom in the name of national security.

The leaking goes on, and for good reason. The masters of the hounds, and many of the hounds, in the great leak hunts are often the quarry in disguise.

What is involved here are not the selective, "authorized" leaks that mark every presidency. Classification being an administrative rather than a legislative act, any president or his anointed agent can, at the drop of a political or diplomatic whim, selectively declassify virtually anything—and does. More than one CIA director has groaned in disbelief while reading stories that came directly from the president and that seriously compromised his treasured intelligence methods and sources.

For that matter, there are times when the publication or broadcasting of such official leaking by one White House hand is publicly rebuked by another. There was, for example, the notorious example of a planted White House story at the height of the Lebanon crisis. Several reporters were brought in and told, among other things, that then national security adviser Robert McFarlane had advocated a get-tough policy against Syria. As it turned out later, he had, but that was beside the point. The initial public White House reaction when the story appeared was livid outrage. Mr. McFarlane was traveling in the Middle East at the time, and according to the White House spokesmen, the stories were a direct threat to his life.

The reaction was hypocritical nonsense, of course, but it was only a slightly larger-than-life rendition of the usual hypocrisy that surrounds the subject. In practice, leaks per se are not abhorred in high places. What are abhorred are leaks without the official seal of approval.

But then comes the tricky part, and the

explanation for the hemorrhaging phenomenon of modern-day official Washington. There has been little consensus in the past few administrations on a number of basic issues, from national security to social welfare. Various factions each have felt they spoke for the president, if only he fully understood all the facts. Each has felt that the rightness of the cause would be understood by the media, Congress and the people as well if only the relevant information were made available. And each has therefore engaged in preemptive leaking, counterstrike leaking and plain, old-fashioned disinformational dealing in an effort to gain the upper hand.

Which brings us back to the two men who were recently fired. If the stories are correct, each leaked information to advance the ideological agenda of the hard-right wing in the administration. In other words, rather than being people who were determined to impede the president's policies, they felt they were advancing them. Not enemies, they reportedly considered their leaks to be in his best interest.

Which is why their dismissal, if the facts are true, is so important. It serves notice that some in the administration understand the root cause of the problem. It penalizes the kind of people who are responsible for most of the leaking that occurs. It should consequently strike at least a few qualms the next time someone is tempted to leak.

It is the right response to the offense, an offense that involves the constant substitution of irresponsible individual judgment—irresponsible in the basic sense because it is anonymous—for presidential policy. The way to fight for a position is first from within, and if the fight goes badly and the issue is of fundamental importance, from outside after resigning. Terminating two midlevel political appointees makes the point. Firing at least one of the well-known leakers in high places would drive it home.